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PAYES LIBERATION DAY, 1937

by

Sol Wieder

There wasn't a person in my home town who was not aware that I hated my red payes. The only one in the world who understood my pain and the hate I had for my payes was my mother who loved me unconditionally. On many occasions my mother saw me staring in the mirror and looking sadly at my red payes, those hideously long and curly dangling sideburns, and my ugly freckles. Once, with that look that melted my heart, she said: "Son, before you know it, you will be grown, your freckles will disappear and the payes will be a thing of the past. But when you are only a twelve year old boy, 'being grown up' feels like a lifetime away."

My father, on the other hand, saw nothing wrong with them. To him, my payes signaled a message to the outside world that I came from a religious home. He tried to convince me that they looked good on me. Who knows, maybe to my father, the "payes" did look good.

I could tolerate my payes in Cheder, the religious school. There, my payes did not annoy me as much as they did at the Public School. In Cheder, many children had payes and mine did not attract any special attention as in the Public School which was co-educational.

In the public school, the Czech teachers called on me to recite a poem, sing a song or do a math problem on the blackboard in front of the entire class because I excelled at these. The problem was the cute girls who focused their eyes on me. The attention brought out my trademark - blushing. I was extremely uncomfortable when the girls stared at me, especially Rachi or Morishko. I wondered if they saw me or they were focused on my ugly freckles and payes. I wished, I were dead.

One night, when I went to sleep, my mind was totally preoccupied with my payes. While I lay in bed, staring at the white ceiling, thinking and scheming, I came up with a genius of an idea that would put an end to my

suffering. I would finally get rid of my payes-persecution complex. I convinced myself that it was quite simple and fool proof. The plan called for the cutting of my right paye and accusing someone else of doing it. I was sure that my parents would look at me and feel sorry for me and ask me to cut the left paye off and not parade with one paye like a freak... "What else could they really do?" When that happens, I would give my mother the honor of cutting the other paye, since she truly understood me and felt my pain.

At this point, all that mattered was:

Payes, Freckles, Rachi and Morishko.

Finally, the day arrived when I would execute my plan. Moses liberated the Jews of Egypt and guided them to the promised land. Today will be my "PAYES LIBERATION DAY". I will no longer be a slave to misery, discomfort and humiliation.

I helped myself to my mother's small scissor, cut off my right paye. For a minute or two, I was extremely nervous and frightened. Cutting off the paye was easy. Facing reality and dealing with the situation at hand was another story, especially when I come home and face my father.

I entered my home quietly like a thief. My mother greeted me and asked whether I was hungry for a "blintz" or two, just to wet my appetite before the evening meal. She knew that I loved her blintzes. She removed a dairy plate from the closet, took a quick look at me and gave a loud scream.

Shlomo, you look funny, very funny with only one paye, she said.

Does Dad know that you cut off one paye?

No, no, a "shaiget" (non Jewish kid) did it.

At this point, my mother felt very sorry for me and tried to console me, telling me that all will be fine. Dad will take care of everything. She giggled like a child when she looked at me. I guess, I must have looked funny with one paye.

"I don't see what's so funny, mother."

"I'll be the laughing stock in town."

My father arrived from synagogue services and was ready for his evening meal. He washed his hands before saying a prayer over the bread. He gave me a quick look and noticed something which he never saw before.

What happened?

Who did this to you?

I started crying "crocodile" tears, telling my father that a "shaigets" did it.

How did it happen?

Just tell me who did it and I'll go and have a talk with his parents.

Give me his name?

I can't.

Why?

I don't exactly know who did it?

How come? What's going on?

There were too many of them, maybe fifteen.

They blindfolded me and I could not see who did it.

I cried, often taking a quick glance to see my father's reaction.

Don't cry Shlomo..... We will work it out, he said.

But how?

For the time being, my father continued.... You will put your left paye behind your ear and we will wait for the right paye to grow slowly. As soon as they are equal in size, you will let them both hang down... Isn't that a good idea?

That wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear.... This is terrible... I couldn't help myself and I let out a thunderous sob, this time with real tears.

"Everybody is going to poke fun of me.

I wish I were dead, dead, dead.."

"Please don't say that my son."

My mother watched the scene, me crying bitterly without a stop, and my father trying to be "King Solomon the wise." As usual, my mother came to my rescue plan, telling my father that I suffered enough and cannot go through months of humiliation.

"O. K. fine... Do you have a better idea?

Mother could not come up with one.

Instead, I jumped in, telling Mom and Dad with a straight face, very sincerely and seriously that it would be better if one of them would cut off my left paye and I'll be more than happy to wait as long as it takes and see both payes grow back equally. Mother and father gave each other a quick tender look, as to say; Worth a try.... A real genius, our Shlomo....

My father was happy that in about three months, I will have payes again. My mother was happy too not too see me crying any more...

Do it while the iron is hot, I said to myself.... I gave my mother the honor of cutting my left paye. I had a feeling that she did it with pleasure... Of course I was happy that my payes were a thing of the past and would not be seen again, ever. I will make sure of that. And I did....

Four weeks later, during the Sabbath dinner, my father stared at me and wondered, why my payes weren't growing again?...

I made sure they didn't.....

